

FILM REVIEW

The Hands That Built America: A Class-Politics Appreciation of Martin Scorsese's *The Gangs of New York*

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What is your money-making now? What can it do now?

What is your respectability now?

Where are your theology, tuition, society, traditions, statute-books now?

Where are your jibes of being now?

Where are your cavils about the Soul now?

'Song of the Broad Axe', 142–6.

Walt Whitman, *Chants Democratic*, II

The mean streets of New York have seldom been meaner.¹ Blood does not just run in them, it gallops, spilled by blades and bludgeons that slice and crack the bodies of the past in a violence that is at once ritualised and reverential. Martin Scorsese's *The Gangs of New York*, a \$120 million epic inspired by Herbert Asbury's 1928 'informal history' of the same name,² commences with a fictitious 1846 gang battle in the Paradise Square, heart of the infamous Five Points district of lower Manhattan, pitting Bill 'The Butcher' Cutting and his Protestant 'Know Nothing' nativists against the Irish Catholic immigrant forces of Priest Vallon and the Dead Rabbits.

Historical hurt: 'The blood stays on the blade'

This opening scene of gore and mayhem, in which the white snow is soon stained ~~various shades~~ of red and pink, sets the cinematic stage, with the victorious Butcher withdrawing his knife from Vallon's chest, affording an opportunity for the close-up gush of spurting blood, a kind of Scorsese 'money shot'. 'Ears and noses are the trophies of the day', proclaims Cutting to the triumphant nativist ranks as the defeated Dead Rabbits stand oddly subdued, the entire combative lot looking, many commentators have remarked, as if they stepped off a set cast midway between

¹ This paper was first presented to Toronto's Marxist Institute in February 2003, and the author is grateful to the audience for its critical comment.

² Asbury 1928.

Braveheart and *Mad Max*, the weaponry eerily reminiscent of some working-class street-warfare equivalent of the gynaecological instruments of *Dead Ringers*.³

Yet this surreal gladiatorial imagery is introduced by a scene of seeming incongruity, marked by consummate gentleness. A supposedly celibate priest tutors his motherless son about life's harshness, and the need to keep them always in mind. As he prepares for the impending battle with a meticulous toilet, Vallon shaves while his young boy, Amsterdam, watches in the shadows. A father's hand passes a blood-stained straight razor to his son, who starts to wipe the red residue on the bottom of his jacket. 'No son, never', admonishes the priest, who continues with caring guidance, 'The blood stays on the blade. . . . Someday you'll understand.'⁴

This insistence that the historical blood stays on the blade is Scorsese's under-appreciated accomplishment, a metaphor of history's hurt that is suggestively extended into a range of complex realms associated with United States class and state formation. To be sure, the odd mainstream critic does indeed gesture toward this fundamental historicisation. Jami Bernard of the *New York Daily News* ends her review, 'Scorsese & the Age of Violence,' with brief, if historically misguided and somewhat pejorative, allusion to what she claims is *The Gangs of New York's* large truth, 'that today's melting pot is yesterday's witches' brew'. More insightful, because it offers at least a few words of elaboration upon such a rhetorical one-liner, is A.O. Scott's *New York Times* 'To Feel a City Seethe'. Scott appreciates Scorsese's ambition, the creation of 'a narrative of historical change,' constructed 'from the ground up'. Moreover, Scott grasps the uniqueness of this presentation: 'There is very little in the history of American cinema to prepare us for the version of American history Mr. Scorsese presents here. It is not the usual triumphalist story of moral progress and enlightenment, but rather a blood-soaked revenger's tale, in which the modern world arrives in the form of a line of soldiers firing into a crowd.'⁵

But such gestures toward the reciprocities of past and present hardly abound in the reviews, most of which are incarcerated within the pageantry of specific personas: Daniel Day-Lewis's riveting role as the Butcher, the rage level appropriate to the theatrical rendition supposedly primed by Day-Lewis blasting his eardrums non-stop with Eminem; Cameron Diaz's miscast beautification of a 'bludget', the female pickpocket, Jenny Everdeane; and the rather unfortunate Leonardo DiCaprio, the film's 'star' and narrator, Amsterdam Vallon, who finds himself ironically outclassed and overshadowed by the rough-hewn Day-Lewis and his mesmerising performance. While most critics swoon over the stunning Five Points set, constructed on the grounds

³ See the depiction of weaponry in Scorsese 2002, p. 146.

⁴ For exact dialogue, I rely on Scorsese 2002. All quotes from dialogue in the film are from this source, unless otherwise stipulated.

⁵ Bernard 2002; Scott 2002.

of the Cinecittà studios in Rome and supervised by Dante Ferretti, one reviewer noted with irritation that the 'fetish for authenticity' – bought and properly paid for in the hiring of various consultants who advised actors, crew, and director on such essentials as Chinese opera, butchering, hand-lettered signs, and mid-nineteenth-century fighting techniques – got in the way of the drama.⁶

Not surprisingly, however, historians (and New York journalism's historically minded) and socialists first out of the gate with their comments have found the film's *lack* of authenticity a disappointment, a point made most tellingly in Joshua Brown's thoughtful *London Review of Books* 'The Bloody Sixth' and, in a journalistic equivalent, Pete Hamill's *Daily News* 'Trampling City's History'. As J. Hoberman complains succinctly, Scorsese's film is 'a hothouse historical fantasy inspired by the already fantastic demimonde chronicles' of Asbury, the result a reading of 'the present back into history' that 'reimagines the past to suit itself . . . a lavish folly'. No *Sexy Beast* this, Hoberman dubs *Gangs* a very rough beast indeed, one 'saddled with abundant backstory'. If history is not, à la Henry Ford, necessarily bunk, Scorsese stands condemned by some as turning it into little more than that.⁷

Scorsese: an unconscious Brecht in an unconscious age

For the most part, I approach the film differently. If, as Fredric Jameson has argued, the one 'transhistorical' imperative of all Marxist, dialectical thought is the demand to 'always historicize!', it must be recognised that in cultural production, not unlike the actual research and writing of history, the issue of authenticity can never be reduced to the merely factual. Yet there *is* a difference separating historical from artistic productions, and the disciplines of dependency on evidence are obviously more rigorous within the writing of history than they can, or perhaps should, be in the making of historical film. As Jameson suggests, within the projects of theory and cultural criticism, a developing 'metacommentary' focuses less on 'the text itself than the interpretations through which we attempt to confront and appropriate it'. Jameson thus makes the case in *The Political Unconscious* for a specific aesthetics of presentation, the narrative form, alongside an understanding of interpretation's primacy:

These divergent and unequal bodies of work are here interrogated and evaluated from the perspective of the specific critical and interpretive task of the present volume, namely to restructure the problematics of ideology,

⁶ Turan 2002.

⁷ Brown 2003; Hamill 2002; Hoberman 2002; Anbinder and Cocks 2002. Two decidedly hostile socialist reviews are Sustar 2003; Walsh 2003a. An intriguing set of comments from the historian James M. McPherson, which concentrates on the draft riots, the \$300 commutation fee, and the alliance of New York's poor whites and Democratic Party/mercantile élite supporters of the racist plantocracy, is found in Walsh 2003b.

of the unconscious and desire, of representation, of history, and of cultural production, around the all-informing process of *narrative*, which I take to be (here using the shorthand of philosophical idealism) the central function or instance of the human mind. . . . I happen to feel that no interpretation can be effectively disqualified on its own terms by a simple enumeration of inaccuracies or omissions, or by a list of unanswered questions. Interpretation is not an isolated act, but takes place within a Homeric battlefield, on which a host of interpretive options are either openly or implicitly in conflict. If the positivistic conception of philological accuracy be the only alternative, then I would much prefer to endorse the current provocative celebration of strong misreadings over weak ones.⁸

In short, art, unlike the writing of history, which combines a conceptual imagination with a rigorous and disciplined recourse to actualities of evidence and event, thrives first and foremost through its creative licence. That licence succeeds, for Marxists at least, if it historicises experience in ways that illuminate truths that are often obscured over time, and that have remained hidden from engagement precisely because large connections and continuities in historical process have been seemingly fractured by change, the tyranny of present-mindedness (which severs our lives from those of earlier generations), and the necessary but unfortunate limitations of painstaking scholarly reconstructions that often get the empirical detail of various trees right only to lose sight of the broad expanse of the forests of the *longue durée*.

Scorsese, I will suggest, has managed to do what few historians, and even fewer film-makers, can legitimately claim as accomplishment. In compressing mid-nineteenth-century history, he develops a narrative that leads inexorably toward some of the major sociopolitical dilemmas of a revolutionary encounter with the making of modern American class society. Something of an unconscious Bertolt Brecht of our times, Scorsese's cast of *Three Penny Opera* characters has, in the past, included child prostitutes, delusional taxi-drivers, made guys, punch-drunk boxers, dirty cops, and other assorted and sordid urban hustlers. It is not surprising that he is enthralled by the gangs of an earlier epoch. Like Brecht, as Terry Eagleton has noted, Scorsese starts not from the 'good old things' so prevalent in what we might designate Hollywood's capacity to nostalgise the past, but from the 'bad new ones' of our own unfortunate historical moment.⁹ His major films, from *Mean Streets* through *Taxi Driver* and *Raging Bull* to *Good Fellas* have never managed to step out of the confines of an almost obsessional fixation on the violence of the present, and although these films have made strong statements, they have always proven politically enclosed in ways that the historicised

⁸ Jameson 1981, pp. 9, 13.

⁹ Eagleton 1981, p. 6.

The Gangs of New York is not.¹⁰ As a consequence, Robert De Niro's drift into pathology in *Taxi Driver*, while powerfully evocative as a representation of social crisis in the 'post'-1960s decade of the 1970s, never manages to shake loose of a fundamentally alienated individuality. When Travis Bickle stands defiant before a full-length mirror, asking, 'Are you talking to me?', his tone increasingly one of menacing belligerence, Scorsese is not necessarily able to draw us into this one-way conversation. Indeed, we want no part of it. But in Amsterdam's voice-over commentaries in *The Gangs of New York*, or in the Butcher's racist soliloquies, it is impossible not to engage with the politicised meanings of collective historical process, however unsettling they may be. If Scorsese's film thus stands very much as one director's urban myth creation, it nevertheless works on the large, often Brueghel-like cinematic canvas, precisely because its art of representation intersects with historical developments in insightful and stimulating ways. The film *does* talk to us as Marxists, I would maintain, if only we can get past the tyrannical fetishisation of 'factuality' to glimpse the wider worlds of class and state formation as they were made in the mid-nineteenth century, and as that making lived on, in various ways, over the course of the next one hundred and fifty years.

Historical authenticity and film

Historians have of late commented much on film, and their judgements often turn on various 'truth tests'. In a way, this is oddly out-of-step with contemporary discussion of historiography and historical method, given that in certain avant-garde historical circles 'truth' itself, and the possibility of achieving it in any authorial narrative of the past, is generally regarded with scepticism. So, too, have historians questioned the ways in which evidence itself is constructed, asking of seemingly routinely generated sources such as the census how they came to be and what their relationship was to evolving structures of power and the not inconsiderable authority of an 'archives of knowledge'. Imagine asking of Foucault's histories of sexuality or of the meanings of prison discipline if they are, in actuality, 'true', or arguing forcefully for the ultimate 'truth' of a newspaper account or a case file: I can hear the peels of jaundiced laughter from the high pews of contemporary theory's sophisticates. Why do we expect the transparency of truth and a discipline of balance in historical film-making, at the same time that we often let others, who work in much closer proximity to archives, evidence, and the layered sedimentation of historical experience, so easily off the hook?

Natalie Zemon Davis discusses authenticity in ways characteristic of historians' demands of film, and no one, perhaps, has more experience than Davis in actually

¹⁰ Two helpful overviews are Kelly 1980 and Connelly 1991.

working through the creation of an historical film, her role in *The Return of Martin Guerre* being somewhat exceptional. Moreover, Davis grapples sensitively with the ways in which the creations of film and historical writing differ, but are also grounded in specific common concerns.¹¹ She cites two reasons that historical films go off-track. Davis is critical, for example, of Hollywood's underestimation of film audiences, and the almost ubiquitous suggestion that mainstream cinema distorts the past the better to make it palpable to audiences suffocating in their present-mindedness. Steven Spielberg's *Amistad*, for instance, was said to have pandered to what he imagined to be contemporary film-goers' need to have the past relate simply and clearly to modern experience, a reductionism that Davis rightly deplores.¹² But, more relevantly for any discussion of *The Gangs of New York*, Davis singles out a habit of cinematic production that demonstrates 'too cavalier an attitude toward the evidence about lives and attitudes in the past'.¹³

This is a tall-order critique, for most historians would, if answering honestly, accent how humble we should be when claiming knowledge of attitudes in the past. Davis then hooks on to this deeply difficult issue an injunction that, 'We must respect that evidence, accepting it as given, and let the imagination work from there'. The phrase that evidence must be accepted 'as given', necessarily gives one cause to pause, but granting Davis the benefit of certain doubts, it is apparent that, for her, making films and making histories, save perhaps for the pride of place reserved for dramatisation in cinematic productions, are similar creative projects. Yet I am not so convinced that film should operate by the same rules as those we have elaborated for historical texts, especially given that some historians clearly do not recognise the rules of evidence that Davis alludes to (although I would agree with what I take to be Davis's main point, that evidence should be grappled with seriously, something that is ironically too often lost sight of in the textualism of our times).

Davis moves on to even more narrowly confining ledges:

If . . . we still decide to depart from the evidence – say in creating a composite character or changing a time frame – then it should be in the spirit of the evidence and plausible, not misleading. Exceptionally, a historical film might move significantly away from the evidence out of playfulness or an experiment with counter-factuality, but then the audience should be let in on the game and not be given the impression of a 'true story'.

Counter-factuality aside, for surely no director is concerned with arguments about historical method, circa 1972, Davis's position, for all its attractiveness, constructs the

¹¹ See, among other statements, Benson 1988, pp. 55–8.

¹² Zemon Davis 2000, p. 131, drawing on Perry 1998, p. 100.

¹³ Zemon Davis 2000, p. 130.

problem of authenticity in rather narrow ways, precisely because it locates an historical film's 'truth testing' within the parameters of affirmation of ascertainable 'facts': the nature of costumes; the location and character consistencies of specific historical individuals; the sequence of events. What is the meaning of a film-maker's adherence to 'the spirit of the evidence'? How are we to ascertain if a direction taken is plausible, rather than misleading? Surely these caveats are centrally about *interpretation*, and where the possibilities of history's *meanings* lie. These are large, often contentious, matters, not easily reducible to ways of presenting history so as to convince readers and viewers of its authenticity. We may know, with some certainty, what Civil War soldiers wore, but are we so easily in agreement about what the historical meaning of the Civil War indeed was?¹⁴ How, if issues of authenticity are broached in this way, extending beyond the questions we can answer decisively into arenas where conflicting historical opinion certainly exists, are we to ascertain just how audiences might 'be let in on the game', and the explanation of creative licence professed? It is a question easier asked than answered, unless one reverts to the most banal of significations.¹⁵ Would we really want Ken Russell's *The Devils*, a film that speaks to the almost timeless themes of power, hypocrisy, and evil's corruptions as much as it does to medieval witchcraft and its suppression by established authorities of Church and State, to fly warning flags concerning historical 'authenticity' in the face of its viewers? Is this not also underestimating an audience's capacity to make discriminating judgements?

Taken in this light, Davis's injunctions, as sensible as they appear on the surface, tend to bypass what I would consider historical film's most significant emancipatory potential, the capacity to make the past speak to our present without boiling it down to digestible 'authenticities'. Larger relational truths that, in Marxist terms, are central motifs in the making of the modern world, will tend to get lost in the shuffle to produce realities of everyday life and chronological validities and comprehensiveness. Highly complex and historically developed processes such as class and state formation

¹⁴ I happen to agree with the general argument about the significance and meaning of the Civil War, propounded by radicals since the time of Marx, and running through the writings of W.E.B. Du Bois and into the best modern historical writing, such as that of James M. McPherson. This stresses the revolutionary character of the confrontation. That said, there remain questions even within Marxist analysis. For instance, precisely because the victory of bourgeois forces in the Civil War was inevitable, given the timing of the conflict and the historically situated development of the productive forces, the *class* meanings of the Civil War are still open to different analytical accents. McPherson's tilt on the \$300 commutation fee, for instance, is apparently to downplay its material significance on the grounds that there were ways around paying and the state, at various levels, orchestrated loopholes. Yet McPherson recognises the fee's symbolic importance as a visible reminder of inequality (albeit too lightly in my judgement). This, and other evidence, conditions McPherson's argument that making too much of the draft and adhering to the claim that the Civil War was a rich man's war, but a poor man's fight, overstates the significance of draftees (who comprised only 74,000 of the 1,000,000 men Lincoln called for and got to fight for the North). This may be true enough, but the *class* symbolism of the \$300 exemption fee was a powerful factor in mobilising working-class resentments. See Walsh 2003b.

¹⁵ Ironically, some historians found Zemon Davis's involvement in *The Return of Martin Guerre* problematic in this very area. See, for instance, Finlay 1988. Note the further statements of Zemon Davis 1987; 1988.

or the problematic character of collective solidarities criss-crossed with fragmentations of race, gender, and national identity, all of which are pivotal in understanding why revolution has both been an absolute imperative for humanity *and* an undertaking that has almost universally failed, are inevitably obscured in this constricted appreciation of historicisation.

What must be acknowledged is that the imperatives of social history's evolution may well take us in this narrow direction of the reproduction of authentic detail regardless of larger issues of interpretation and meaning. Social historians once imagined their project as one of liberating historical research and its dramas from the limitations of an ideological consensual historiography. Their agenda was, it could be suggested, a radical provisioning of pasts locked into specific paradigms. 'Histories from below' and studies of subaltern groups, as well as attention to resistance, not to mention scrutiny of theories associated with Marx and other radical Enlightenment thinkers, all spoke in a 1960s idiom of challenge that was rooted in the desire to turn the interpretive tables and stand 'history' on its proverbial head. But social history has moved off this ground and, along with the new cultural history, has located new subject matters, new theoretical frameworks, and is now coloured by new perspectives, few of which embrace revolution as a desired end. Social histories have developed in ways distanced from the working class and its collective struggles, and have recently accented subjectivity, liberal order consensus, and varied accommodations and adaptations. As insightful as are studies orchestrated by such concerns, they are differentiated from the radical understandings of a useable past that animated social history's beginnings. Whereas the general strike or the riotous confrontation figured as central subjects two and three decades ago, we now have studies of tourism, royal pageantries, and the debutante ball.

This is not unrelated to how historians approach the issue of historical film and authenticity. For, as social historians have increasingly valorised subjectivity over collectivity, and immersed themselves in the spectacle and the micro-experience, insisting on the equally politicised weight of realms perhaps once understood as somewhat removed from the directly political, our conceptualisation of the dimensions of the political has expanded and, it might be suggested, inevitably suffered dilution. In the process we may reify detail over political engagement. Many historians relate to film, I think, out of this new, and somewhat politically problematic, context. Thus, contemporary comment on film and history that strikes too literalist a note on authenticity may invariably be limiting film's possibilities, just as social history has become, over the last decade, increasingly distanced from its 1960s origins in a political project of remaking the social order, constraining its engagement with a transformative project. Marxists demand more of film (and of history), because more is at stake than 'art for art's sake' (although by this I do not suggest some blunt demand that all art merely serve class-struggle ends, and that we must see some kind of Stalinist socialist

realism as the only 'true' political aesthetic), more at stake than 'historical authenticity for authenticity's sake'.¹⁶

Film-makers, it needs to be pointed out, do not see any of this as a problem. They understand, for the most part, that they are not putting historical fact on film. Their purpose is rarely one of making histories visually true, but of presenting histories that relate to the intersections of past and present. To stop the histories of the past, at any given 'moment', and expect film-makers to both get detail *and* continuity right, is not only asking a lot, it may be demanding that a gutting of any potential politics take place in the name of 'authenticity'. John Sayles, criticised by historians for playing fast and loose with the 'facts' of *Matewan's* past, getting details of mining experience wrong,¹⁷ offered the rejoinder that he deliberately reconfigured the historical terrain the better to convey through an atypical event, the Matewan Massacre, a larger representative history.¹⁸ In a sense, the issue is even more elastic than Sayles's defence, because it could well be the case that an 'historical' film would collapse historical experience into a particular periodisation doing actual violence to a specific time-frame, but use a kind of narrative to do grander justice to historical trends and experiences. What, historians who do not have such licence need to be asking themselves, can be wrong with such a representational strategy given the paucity of historical consciousness that exists in our times?¹⁹ The slight, we as historians must recognise, is less on movie-goers in the twenty-first century, than it is on ourselves as 'practitioners' and 'dues-payers' of a particular guild.

***The Gangs of New York* and the detail of (non-)authenticity**

What is wrong with Scorsese's *The Gangs of New York*? The list is long, starting with the pivotal place of gangs and race riots.

The Dead Rabbits-Bowery Boy Riot took place on 4 July 1857, and had no connection to the traumatic events of the Draft Riots of 1863, in which no naval bombardment of the Five Points district ever took place. Indeed, the Five Points, although it was the site of rioting, was hardly the epicentre of the Draft Riots outbreak, which probably left approximately 120 dead: the concentrated fighting was uptown in streets in the 20s and 30s, strongholds of the Republican Party. While Scorsese's historical consultant, Luc Sante, declares with certainty that 'the core of the participants [in the Draft Riots]

¹⁶ Ramirez 1999.

¹⁷ Brier 1988; Dubofsky 1990; and the more sympathetic discussion of *Matewan* and historical criticism in Newsinger 1995.

¹⁸ Mico 1995, pp. 13, 11–28 and Sayles 1987.

¹⁹ With respect to *The Gangs of New York*, it needs to be recognised that those making the film were not unaware that they were doing violation to the 'authentic' record of the past, in as much as they were cognisant of how they were blurring chronology and event into a congealed presentation of a fiction that was nevertheless rooted in a general historicisation. See Scorsese 2002; Anbinder and Cocks 2002.

unquestionably came from the Five Points', more scrupulous research has established that only two of the hundreds of rioters arrested could be established to have been residents of the infamous Sixth Ward. But the anti-black pogrom in the Five Points was nevertheless virulent, and interested Democratic Party attempts to depict the 'Bloody Sixth' as free of riotous taint in 1863 were little more than cover-ups. Mobs of hundreds of Irish attacked African-American workplaces, bars employing black waiters, the New York African Society for Mutual Relief, and shanties, boarding-houses, and tenements in which blacks resided, many of them on Baxter Street. Buildings were torched (although not the Five Points Mission), blacks were beaten in the streets, and rough musickings were the nightly norm. Three days of violence convinced most African-Americans in the Five Points that 'their only safety is in flight'. This capped forty years of insecurity for blacks in the Sixth Ward. In the 1820s, the African-American population of the district had been roughly 15 per cent (or twice the norm throughout New York City) of those living in the congested slum. But many blacks left the Five Points after a series of anti-abolitionist riots and confrontations in the 1830s and 1840s; the 1863 debacle drove the final African-American population of the Five Points into retreat, where it settled in safer havens such as Long Island. Once home to over 1,000 blacks, the Five Points, which claimed a black population of just under 400 in 1863, recorded only 132 'coloured' residents in the 1870 census.²⁰

Despite this obvious openness to racism, a nativist leader such as Bill Cutting would never have set himself up in the Five Points, let alone come to have ruled the rookeries of the rough fare, demographic, commercial, and cultural, that intersected the old Anthony, Orange, and Cross Streets. For the dominant immigrant population was Irish Catholic. A Know Nothing like Butcher Bill had no base in the Five Points: in an 1856 presidential election, the Democratic candidate polled an overwhelming majority of 574 votes, outdistancing his Republican and nativist rivals who managed between them to secure a meagre 25 ballots. Indeed, Cutting's actual inspiration, the real-life Bill 'the Butcher' Poole, memorialised in Asbury's *The Gangs of New York*, plied his trade, his Know-Nothingism, and his legendary prowess in the bar-room brawl in what is now Christopher Street and the West Village piers, rather than in the Sixth Ward itself. Shot in the heart by Irish gang leader John Morrissey in a Broadway saloon on a bitter cold 1855 night, Poole clung to life for two weeks before dying, his last words, 'Good-bye boys, I die a true American', destined to be appropriated as the rallying cry of nativist forces, who gathered 5,000 strong to march 'The Butcher's' body through New York streets in a declaration of martyrdom.²¹

²⁰ Brown 2003, p. 33; Anbinder 2002, pp. 314–18; Sante 1991, p. 353. On the Draft Riots the two major modern statements are Bernstein 1990 and Cook 1974.

²¹ Asbury 1928, pp. 81–100.

As James M. McPherson has suggested, Scorsese's understanding of this Democratic Party hegemony, especially the pivotal role of its anti-Civil-War wing and its ties to New York City's mercantile élite, which sealed a pro-Southern plantocracy alliance of the richest and poorest (decidedly *not* the skilled, organised working-class) segments of the North's metropolitan capital is scant indeed. The film does far too little in exploring the ugly politics of this Democratic Party faction, bypassing such figures as Fernando Wood of the Mozart Hall group, who called for New York to secede from the Union in 1861. Wood and his fellow pro-Confederacy 'Copperheads' utilised their power and their control of sections of the press (Wood's brother Benjamin was a long-time editor of the *New York Daily News*, the largest circulation daily in the United States at the time) to fan the flames of racist animosity. They used a recent history of blacks being driven from the New York docks as strike-breakers in June of 1863, as well as a tense economic climate in which rising rents, higher food prices, and a rash of trade-union organising signalled, in the words of *Fincher's Trade Review*, 'The Upheaving Masses in Motion!' to exacerbate fears among workers that hordes of freed slaves were about to invade Northern cities such as New York and overrun job markets long designated the 'property' of 'white labour'. In adding insult to injury, according to the 'Copperheads', the Northern white working class was being asked to fight a war that was destined to lead to its economic and social ruin.²²

Beyond these lapses in authenticity and problems of adequate coverage of the lay of the contemporary political land in *The Gangs of New York* lie a plethora of what some historians will designate 'howlers'. The cavernous underground tunnels in which Amsterdam retreats to have Jenny lick his wounds, replete with its background of stone ledges lined with skulls, could not have existed in the Five Points, whose marshy subsoil defies such a labyrinth. Scorsese's depiction of the New York City Chinese in the early 1860s is perhaps seemingly the most egregious pushing of the authenticity envelope: constructed as pig-tailed and inscrutable, but commercially adept enough to entice the nativists to celebrate at their Mott Street Sparrow's Chinese Pagoda, in which Oriental acrobats bounce off the floor and caged prostitutes are suspended from the ceiling, auctioned off by none other than P.T. Barnum, the Chinese hate the Butcher and have a silent agreement with Amsterdam. In actuality, the Asian population in or adjacent to the Five Points in 1863 was tiny to the point of being inconsequential, and Chinese immigration to New York City did not begin in earnest until after completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869. Just as Chinatown would be an actual creation post-dating the period in which *The Gangs of New York* is set, so too would be the authority of a central figure in the film, William 'Boss' Tweed of Tammany Hall. In the time period in which Amsterdam pursues his revenge

²² Walsh 2003a; 2003b; Montgomery 1967, pp. 102–7.

of his father's killing at the hands of Bill Cutting, Tweed was indeed climbing the ladder, but his Ring would not control New York until later in the 1860s and 1870s. Nor would Barnum's American Museum burn in 1863, during the Draft Riots, but in 1868, or public hangings, the last of which happened in 1835, be a part of the political theatre of the early 1860s.

Finally, although no reviewer to my knowledge (historian or film critic) has mentioned this, there is scant evidence, if any, that cross-dressing fairies, or 'She-Hes', would have frequented the Five Points with such confidence that they would walk the streets openly and cause barely a ripple of notice in public dances put on by proselytizing Protestants. To be sure, the Bowery border of the Five Points was an early promenade of all manner of sexually open and transgressive characters, and the Sixth Ward was infamous as a centre of commercialised vice, but even George Chauncey's diligent searches have found no reference to Five Points' fairies. The closest we can come to locating such a 'She-He' presence anywhere near the Sixth Ward is the late 1870s Armory Hall dance pavilion at the corner of the Lower East Side's Hestor and Elizabeth Streets, where an Irish sex and entertainment entrepreneur, Billy McGlory, hired half a dozen men who powdered and rouged themselves, sometimes dressing in feminine attire, to entertain high-rollers and big-spenders with a risqué sexual 'circus' in the curtained privacy of solitary booths. McGlory was a graduate of the Five Points, and bare-knuckled it in the 1850s with the Forty Thieves and Chichesters, but his Armory Hall was a night haunt and its offerings hardly the norm of daylight hours.²³

More serious because it is more sinister, as Joshua Brown has suggested, is Scorsese's residual assimilation of Asbury's reproduction and sensationalising of the nineteenth-century missionary slum literature, epitomised by Matthew Hale Smith's *Sunshine and Shadow in New York* (1868), in which the Five Points is constructed as a degraded netherworld of vice and violence, an anarchistic orgy of brutality and criminality coincident with the arrival of the immigrant Irish.²⁴ 'A culture of poverty' in which the belligerence of the 'underclass' is accented, suggests Brown, excuses the nativism that animated Asbury and that paints the gangs and the Five Points district itself in bold, 'larger-than-life' strokes that distort the history of oppression within which the immigrant Irish worked and suffered. As Happy Jack, a one-time Dead Rabbit turned 'crusher' cop, escorts a sight-seeing crew of uptown ladies and gentlemen through the Five Points, he waxes eloquent on the Irish arrival in America: 'Ah, but only shattered dreams await them. Pauperism and dereliction. Drunkenness and depravity.

²³ The above paragraphs draw upon Brown 2003, pp. 33–4; Hamill 2002; Callow, Jr. 1966; Connable and Silberfarb 1967, pp. 138–72; Mandelbaum 1990; Beck 1898, pp. 11–12; Ernst 1965, p. 45; Kuo Wei Tchen 1990, pp. 16–63; Werner 1926; Chauncey 1994, p. 37; Asbury 1928, pp. 186–9.

²⁴ Brown 2003, pp. 33–4; Smith 1868; Ladies of the Mission 1854. Anbinder 2002, pp. 14–37, outlines the literature on the Five Points 'culture of poverty', in what he calls the 'Five Points of the mind'.

Molestation and murder, kind sirs and ladies.’ Evangelicals flit through the film, deploring the God-forsaken vice, misery and squalor of the Sixth Ward. ‘They said it was the worst slum in the world’, Amsterdam narrates, ‘To us it was home.’ And, in Scorsese’s construction, the gangs are the families of the Five Points. But archaeological evidence unearthed in the early 1990s, with the construction of a new court house in an old neighbourhood of what was once The Bloody Sixth, tells a different tale. Some 850,000 artefacts were uncovered, and while the job of dating precisely these remnants of the past was never done, they do suggest a varied socio-economic life considerably at odds with the Asbury-Scorsese myth-making. The assortment of buttons, needles, fabrics, medicine bottles, combs, hairbrushes, and crockery dug out of the bowels of an old Sixth Ward block hints at the robust presence of home work and family routines that have unfortunately been overshadowed by the extravagant depiction of ‘the dark side’ all too prominent in nineteenth-century accounts of the Five Points upon which both Asbury and Scorsese have drawn uncritically.²⁵

Born of resistance to the impersonal cash nexus of the wage relation and the ‘market revolution’, gangs were marked with the mechanic accents of dishevelled trades and rough labours resistant to the encroachments of capitalism, which increasingly brought under its sway the relations of master and man in various tanneries, distilleries, slaughterhouses, modest manufactories (producing looking glasses, umbrellas, shoes), tobacco works, furniture-producing sheds, building sites, artisanal trades, and on public works projects and the docks of the transatlantic trade. This process also demanded class subordination in the wider non-work worlds of politics and culture. The gangs, in their recalcitrance, were complemented by other arenas of youthful masculine associational life, including fire companies, local militias, and target and sporting clubs.

All of this was played out not only in the mayhem of the so-called ‘ancient laws of combat’ so extolled by Scorsese in his depiction of the almost constitutionalist courts of conflict participated in by various gangs – Shirt Tails, Plug Uglies, Daybreak Boys, Chichesters, American Guards, Little Forty Thieves, Roach Guards, Native Americans, Bowery Boys – but also through the film’s protagonists, The Butcher and the Vallons (father and son). It left its mark on and was influenced by the emerging radical, and often German-led, trade-union movement, a point stressed by one of the few explicitly socialist reviews of *The Gangs of New York* that suggests something positive in Scorsese’s contribution, Mike Davis’s ‘The Bloody Streets of New York’. Davis feels that Scorsese gets the squalor and oppression of the Five Points right, differentiating him from other historians. But he fixes his sights on what Scorsese (and indeed almost every other reviewer) has missed. For New York’s mid-century

²⁵ Walsh 2003a.

immigration stream was not merely fed by tributaries of starving, cholera-ridden, job and freedom-seeking Irish.

As late as 1860, New York's major Old World population, its 203,000 Irish immigrants, was rivalled seriously in terms of the newly-arrived only by some 118,000 Germans. Broadly speaking, these Germans had been forged in different circumstances than those of the destitute Irish, the failed revolutionary impulses of 1848 being of paramount importance. Yet there were some within the Irish diaspora, such as radical Fenians, who connected with German radicalism (as well as with the smaller enclaves of Scottish Jacobins and English Chartist), especially in New York's Lower East Side Kleindeutschland, a 400 city-block area adjacent to the Five Points, encompassing the city's Tenth, Eleventh, Thirteenth and Seventeenth Wards. There, German socialists and communists toiled for wages and struggled to build a workers' movement that united ethnicities and trades. Roughly fifteen per cent of New York's population in these years was German-born, and thoughts of the red promise of 1848 and its barricades still permeated a consciousness of producer rights, labour-capital conflict, and social justice. This heritage reached forward from the nascent beginnings of labour radicalism in the 1850s into struggles for the shorter working day in the 1860s and 1870s, culminating in the massive successes of the New York City Knights of Labor, which contained subterranean cells of anarcho-communist influence in a secret order within the order known as the Home Club. The Henry George mayoralty campaign of 1886, a mobilisation that came dangerously close to securing power for the working class in the country's major metropolitan centre, was perhaps the culmination of this nineteenth-century politics of class struggle, which achieved the 1880s designation, 'The Great Upheaval'.

Despite overlapping connections among the differentiated working-class constituencies of this at times generalised upsurge, the day labourers and sweated workers of the Irish Five Points travelled Scorsese's meanest streets, and their historical experience was never quite that of the artisanal proletarianisation and radicalism associated with German New York. Irish gang lives and fire company raucousness pegged them as 'traditionalists' in their politically unconscious resistance. In 1863, they rioted against the Draft, and its \$300 exemption for the 'socially superior'; they resented the rich, but they killed their poor black brothers and sisters. Among German radicals, such 'traditionalist' hostilities to established bourgeois power were scorned, and as Irish and nativist gangs battled throughout the 1850s, knocking heads and eventually exchanging primitive pistol fire in the crooked alleyways off the Bowery, European immigrant rebels embraced abolitionism, variants of anticapitalism, co-operation, and trade unionism. During the Depression of 1857, as the Dead Rabbits honed their weapons, German radicals combined with Irish and native American labour figures to beat back the rising tide of unemployment. When the Draft Riots erupted in 1863, many dissident Germans repudiated the deadly formalisation of class privilege

embodied in the exemption fee, just as they condemned the vicious attacks on black Americans as a tragic division of the ranks of the powerless. But the radicals could not keep the anti-black, largely Irish Catholic mob in check, and were soon swept off the streets as the ugliness of the moment brushed class solidarities aside in the name of an incendiary racist revenge.²⁶

With this much wrong and missing from Scorsese's film what can be right and powerfully suggestive about it? In a word, quite a bit.

Class politics and the Janus vision of a fragmented working class

The message of Scorsese's film is not so much that America was made in its bloody streets, as so many critics claim with interpretive certainty and ease. Rather, *The Gangs of New York* is suggestive of a more two-sided historical exchange. At the core of Scorsese's representation is, to be sure, the impulse 'from below', the place of the rough culture of masculine muscle and the street authority of head-knocking violence and intimidation. As the Butcher puts it, with characteristic brutality:

The spectacle of fearsome acts. Someone steals from me, I cut off his hands. He offends me, I cut out his tongue. He rises against me, I cut off his head, and stick it on a pike. Hold it high in the streets so all can see. That's what preserves the order of things.

But what is apparent in the film is that this plebeian power is never entirely removed from relations of reciprocity with other structures of order, in which the terrorism of established (and often quite 'polite') authority is more masked. In this sense, the violence of Scorsese's mean streets is in reality more integrated with the institutions of class domination than most critics seem to grasp. The gangs exist in symbiotic relationship with other spheres: the police; the law; the political boss; agencies of discipline to which youth can be submitted for 'an education'; the state. If this is not historically 'true', in all of the particular evidential detail, it is nevertheless true in a larger relational sense, and Scorsese is thus able to sustain analytical insights through his film that are in some ways beyond what historians can 'prove' with recourse to the archives. Moreover, *The Gangs of New York* conveys with panache a contest between one sector of the plebeian poor, with its backward-looking feudalistic understandings of American 'loyalty', and its class nemesis, a forward-marching bourgeoisie that

²⁶ The above paragraphs draw on Davis 2003, which contrasts markedly with other left commentary in Sustar 2003 and the even more vehement antagonism in Walsh 2003a. See, for background on labour organisation and German radicalism, Wilentz 1984; Schneider 1994; Levine 1986 and 1992; Wittke 1952; Binder and Reimers, 1995, pp. 59–92. For discussions of working-class typologies relevant to this period that include discussion of 'traditionalism' see Dawley and Faler 1976; Laurie 1980, pp. 53–66. On the Knights of Labor and the Home Club see Weir 2000, pp. 23–46.

would fashion its power and authority in production and exchange as well as out of the enticing carrot of 'democracy' and welfare provisioning, backed by the violent stick of the state's repressive terror.

For all of Bill Cutting's 'ownership' of the Five Points, it is an oddly feudal vassalage that is his due: 'but in all the Five Points there's nothin' that runs, walks, or cocks his toes up don't belong to Bill the Butcher', Johnny tells Amsterdam as they walk through the streets of the Bloody Old Sixth. Tribute and loyalty are the gang leader's due, his régime less one of accumulation than it is rightful obeisance, driven not so much by the relentless need, logic and laws of capitalist development, but by a purposeful resistance to winds of change:

Everything you see belongs to me, to one degree or another. The beggars and newsboys and quick thieves here in Paradise. The sailor dives and gin mills and blind tigers on the waterfront. The anglers and amusers, the She-Hes and Chinks. Everybody owes, and everybody pays. Because that's how you stand up against the rising of the tide.

This is, first and foremost, an *ideological* stand, one made against inevitable historical defeat. As Tweed reminds the Butcher in a public encounter, 'You're a great one for fighting, Bill, I know, but you can't fight forever.' 'I can go down doing it', replies Cutting. 'And you will', is the Boss's curt reply.

For Scorsese seldom lets us pass through those Paradise Alley/Five Points' streets in which Amsterdam is tutored on the lord's tithes without confronting a looming sign, 'Money Lent', symbolic of the new relations of the cash nexus that are everywhere transforming the meanings of everyday life for the plebeian masses and their rude seigneurial overlords. The film never allows us to forget that the gang leader's proprietary right is fragile, precisely because it is in a state of transition. Defiant of capital and the state, the 'muscle' that the Butcher commands is clearly on its last legs in 1863, and Boss Tweed reminds the Butcher of this hard reality in words both deferential and demanding. Tweed pleads with Cutting to curb his excesses in the name of a larger prize of shared spoils:

Bill, I can't get a day's work done for all the good citizens coming in here to fret me about crime in the Points. Some, I'm horrified to say, have gone so far as to accuse Tammany of connivance with this so-called rampant criminality. What am I to do? I can't have this. Something has to be done.

The Butcher, who knows well that Tweed controls the police, is able to at first shrug the problem off with an offering of a public hanging to appease the malcontented, and the expectation that, in the end, since the state and its armed force appears to him a malleable tool of specific interests, the politicians ought to be able to get 'the crushers', or cops, to do whatever is needed. Tweed is aghast at the crudity of the

suggestion: 'The police? Oh, Jesus, no. Jesus, no. The appearance of the law must be upheld. . . . Especially while its being broken.'

For a time, the old street power and the new machine politics of an emerging capitalist state work in tandem. But, in the end, the alliance must crack, for the Butcher knows only raw power and its threat of fearsome acts: 'Mulberry Street and Worth. Cross and Orange and Little Water. Each of the Five Points is a finger, and when I close my hand the whole territory is a fist. I can turn it against you.' Tweed, emblematic of the capitalist project of hegemony, has a wider vision, in which 'progress' pays:

But we're talking about different things, Bill. I'm talking about civic duty. Responsibilities we owe to the people. Schools and hospitals, sewers and utilities; street construction, repairs and sweeping. Business licences, saloon licences, carting licenses . . . streetcars, ferries, rubbish disposal. There's a power of money to be made in this city, Bill. With your help, the people can be made to understand that all of these things are best kept within what I like to call the Tammany family. Which is why I'm talking about an alliance between our two great organizations.

Just as the declining powers of feudal Europe bartered for a time their fading longevity, placating an emerging bourgeoisie, Cutting and Tweed dance their mutual material attraction through much of Scorsese's film. But, ultimately, the Butcher's ragged honour, soiled to its violent core by his commitment to an ideology of nativist and racist entitlement, cloaked in the convenient garb of patriotic 'Americanism', is incapable of being as pliant as Tweed, whose instincts, like those of capital, are to turn every profit, whatever the 'price' and with whomever will enhance the prospects of this happening. Eventually, Bill will no longer play. He wants no part of anything that will 'befoul his [father's] legacy by givin' this country over to them what's had no hand in the fighting for it? Why? Because they come off a boat, crawling with lice and beggin' you for soup?' Cutting believes in history, however distorted his sense of the past; for him, the blood truly does stay on the blade. Tweed, Henry Fordesque in his willingness to massage the historical past into whatever suits the accumulative appetites of the present, informs Bill, 'you're turning your back on your future'. 'Not our future', replies the Butcher. By the end of the film, the Butcher's absolutist Five Points 'state' and the rising bourgeoisie of the capitalist nation are mortal enemies. Tweed bemoans the outcome, 'You don't know what you've done to yourself'. Cutting is, ironically, the more eloquent:

You think lighting strikes when you talk, Mr. Tweed, but I can't hardly hear you. . . . I know your works. You are neither cold nor hot. So because you are lukewarm, and are neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth. You can build your filthy world without me. . . . Come down to the

Points again and you'll be dispatched by mine own hand. Now go back to your celebration and let me eat in peace. I've paid you fair.

The film ends for the Butcher as it began, but with the mythical gang leader on the opposite end of the knife. 'Its fair', Cutting might well have remembered himself saying, 'a touch indelicate, but fair.'

But Tweed's victory, a metaphor for capital's capacity to vanquish 'the ancient' powers of its plebeian challengers, is not possible without new pacts with sectors of the subaltern classes. In Amsterdam and the revived Irish immigrant Dead Rabbits, Tweed finds a forceful alliance, one that seals his victory with the glue of incorporation, the rising youth gang leader bartering for political representation and grasping the potential power of the Luxemburgist mass uprising:

There's more of us coming off these ships every day. I heard fifteen thousand Irish a week. And we're afraid of the Natives? Get all of us together and we ain't got a gang, we got an army. Then all you need is a spark. Something to wake us all up.

As the Draft Riots provide that first spark, ignited in the resentments of the poor against the rich and their capacity to buy the continued lives of their sons with a few hundred dollars, Scorsese suggests, through Amsterdam's groping toward class consciousness, the coming conflagration that pits labour irrevocably against capital:

From all over the city they came. Ironworkers, factory boys, day laborers, schoolteachers, street cleaners. . . . Irish, American, Polish, German, anyone who never cared about slavery or the Union – whole or sundered. . . . The Earth was shaking now, but we was the only ones who didn't know it.

And because they did not know it, because the Earth's shaking took place with workers handicapped in their state of unconsciousness, the waking up did not happen.

The first cries of the Draft Riots were screams of class rage. 'Nobody goes to work today. They shut the factories down.' Outraged yells of, 'The Hell with your damned Draft!', were punctuated by images of rioters ripping the doors of a mansion open, smashing exquisite vases and splintering a billiards table. The symbolism of such acts was unmistakable: 'Let's smash the bastards to hell!' Material meanings were posed with blunt determination: 'Hey! There's a three-hundred dollar man. Get him!' But all of this quickly give way to the sorry descent into racist vendetta. As a woman in the crowd yells, 'Come on, lads! Kill the nigger bastards! String them up!', the Draft Riots move rapidly out of their articulation of class resentments and into sickening scenes of lynching, beating, and burning alive scapegoated African-Americans, a hideous carnage of white rage. And the Natives and the Dead Rabbits square off. Class struggle is overwhelmed by intra-class warfare: white against black; white against the not-quite-white-enough.

The ultimate victor is the newly consolidated state, with its special bodies of armed men subduing its unconscious proletarian challenge (ordered by the feudal gangs) as a prefatory volley to its subjugation of the seigneurial slave régime. Capital wrought its vengeance against the first deformed working-class insurrection that struggled to unfold in New York's streets in 1863, just as it would crush the regionalised power of a counterposed 'order' premised on unfree labour. Thousands of federal troops, many of them working-class Irish New Yorkers, slashed into and fired upon crowds of their mothers and sisters, uncles and cousins. New York streets succumbed, as would Savannah plantations. Scores of the poor dropped in the bloody streets of New York metropolitan industrialisation, just as poor whites would fall throughout the slave South. The corpse of Northern, urban class struggle was riddled with the bullets and bayonets of a state that was about to extend its colonisation and conquest of a way of life incompatible with the ever-widening ethos of the market revolution and its demanding extensions of the reach of accumulation and exploitation. As one of the Scottish actors, the Irish Nativist McGloin, comments, in summing up his sense of what the film is about:

[P]olitics is an extension of war by other means. Looking at the period in which the film takes place, the tension between these two outlooks seems to be present, because there's a brutal, intense warfare happening between the gangs. But this tribalism is ultimately superseded when the big guns come. Who's got the big guns? The state. And the way the film covers that enormous scope is wonderful.²⁷

What *The Gangs of New York* depicts, through its historically inaccurate congealing of the Dead Rabbits-Native American gang warfare with the Draft Riots, is the larger historical accuracy of capital's simultaneous subjugation of the challenges of the plebeian street and the Southern plantocracy. This came about through the power of the capitalist state at the same time as it was a formative moment in the consolidation of that state.

Had Scorsese's film made only this elementary point, it would have made a significant contribution. The Draft Riots were indeed the climax of an age, and, if the gangs were but a part of that historical moment, rather than its defining feature, they were nevertheless an articulation of critical components of class formation. The 'muscle' of the mean, plebeian streets and the politics of provisioning that Boss Tweed and Tammany Hall came to epitomise were a Faustian bargain in the complex relations of industrial-capitalist America's formative years. A good part of the rough and smooth hands that came together in an 'alliance' of the 1850s and 1860s ended with the Civil

²⁷ Gary Lewis in Scorsese 2002, p. 95.

War and the consolidation of United States capital and its servile state. 'Democracy' was born as the gang-ordered 'electioneering by riot' gave way to the more orchestrated ordering of votes by political machines, which bought their purchase of the public purse with soup and jobs and secured their hegemony with the disembodied 'votes' of the poor. What Tweed bemoaned in the Draft Riots was *not*, of course, the racist wall of fire that now separated black and white workers, nor the deaths of so many on both sides of the colour line. 'We're burying a lot of votes down here tonight', he moans, for, in America, votes, like time, are money. Amsterdam is left the last, sad word, the voice of class unconsciousness:

How many New Yorkers died that week we never knew. We thought there wouldn't be no country left by the end of it. And that no matter how much blood they spilt to build the city up again, and keep on building, for the rest of time, it would again be like no one even knew that we was ever here.

Having won the ear of the political boss on the basis of his 'traditionalist' street muscle, the young Vallon barter effectively within capitalism's metaphorical network of the state's brokerage politics. He cajoles Boss Tweed, wins Monk away from the limiting loyalties of self and strength, putting him on the hustings and giving voice to 'democratic' possibility, in the end securing the election of a sheriff who threatens the Butcher more than he does the evolving machinery of hegemonic urban politics. Yet, for all of Amsterdam's successful pulling of the wires of modern state-building somewhat successfully 'from below', he ultimately finds himself and his class on the short end of power's historical stick.

What this suggests is that historians have perhaps been of late too quick to revere 'republicanism's' rhetoric of egalitarianism, while ignoring Alan Dawley's old suggestion that, in the United States, electoral politics 'was the main safety valve of working-class discontent', the ballot box a coffin of class consciousness.²⁸ But something lived on in this coffin. It produced a twentieth-century New York that would simultaneously sustain a social-democratic polity and racial inequality, a vibrant and militant working class and widening gaps between rich and poor, episodic instances of labour-capital conflict and political administrations and histories of corruption and cynicism.²⁹ As Amsterdam would have said: 'it's a funny feeling being took under the wing of a dragon. It's warmer than you think'.³⁰ The Dead Rabbits, both their 'muscle' and their negotiations, were gone, but they could hardly be forgotten.

²⁸ Dawley 1976.

²⁹ Freeman 2000.

³⁰ Amsterdam's comment takes us, I would argue, in different, indeed more fruitful directions than those posed by Walsh's rejection of what he considers Scorsese's misanthropy. Walsh wants to merely *reject* the backward ideology of racism and 'mindless violence' that he sees as the central animating forces in Scorsese's 'street level' 'reactionary and anti-intellectual distortion of history'. Walsh cites the 1840s and 1850s as a Renaissance period, in which the influence of

Class and race: a relation of proximity

Race and understandings of Americanism and whiteness are obviously central to both contemporary historiography and Scorsese's *The Gangs of New York*.³¹ Many critics will no doubt find the chaotic congealments of the film suspicious. How can Bill Cutting, a nativist anti-Irish bigot, walk side-by-side with Irish Catholics such as McGloin, or cultivate a young Irish protégé, Amsterdam? Could the Dead Rabbits, an Irish Catholic street gang, have harboured blacks? The particularities of a detailed factuality are perhaps, however, less important than the suggestiveness of Scorsese's depiction of what Five Points' life was like racially.

There is no mistaking the interracial and cross-ethnic character of the Sixth Ward, and like many similar urban districts of the United States at mid-century, racial and ethnic mixing was a norm that co-existed with varied levels of racism that cut themselves into the fabric of everyday life. This process was, however, a double-edged sword. On the one hand, as Fanny Kemble noted in her *Journal of a Residence on a Georgia Plantation* (1863), the more the Irish and African-American peoples were lumped together, the greater the hostility between them. On the other, as was apparent in New York and Boston, 'mixed' marriages often involved poor black men and poor Irish women. The Five Points was a cauldron of this 'race mixing', its dance halls, cock pits, hotels of assignation, sexualised streets, grog shops, and raucous theatres a venue for liaisons and cultural crossovers. Frederick Douglass regarded the Bloody Old Sixth as little more than a receptacle for 'the filthy scum of white society', but there is no doubt that blacks and whites mixed on more equal terms in its dark alleyways, squalid tenements, and biracial bagnios than in uptown salons, where relations between blacks and whites turned largely on the necessity of African-Americans serving their plutocratic masters. It was, not surprisingly, in the notorious Five Points that an 1844 dance contest pitted the Irish 'Master,' John Diamond, against the black 'Juba,' William Henry Lane.³²

Scorsese materialises this black-white relation and, although historians are prone to downplay crass economism in our understandings of class and race, the Butcher's nativism/racism are constant reminders of just how critical the hierarchy of racialised wages was in the making of class. As Bill surveys the Irish descending the ships in the harbour onto the streets of republican citizenry he snorts, 'I don't see no Americans.

Hawthorne, Poe, Melville, Emerson, Thoreau, Longfellow, Dickinson, Whitman, and Stowe was paramount. I do not dispute the significance of this 'high' culture and its accomplishment, but question the validity of divorcing it entirely from 'lower' forms of thought and cultural practice, as is surely indicated by the case of Whitman. Moreover, it is necessary to understand the class *inflections* of problematic historical processes, rather than simply rejecting them as wrong and inadequate. See Walsh 2003a.

³¹ On whiteness studies, both their richness and suggestiveness, as well as some problems of the field's handling of evidence, see Arnesen 2001, with replies by James Barrett, David Brody, Barbara J. Fields, Eric Foner, Victoria C. Hattam, Adolph Reed Jr., and a rejoinder by Arnesen.

³² See Ignatiev 1995, especially pp. 41–2.

I see trespassers. Paddies who'll do a job for a nickel what a nigger does for a dime and a white man used to get a quarter for – then moan about it when you treat them like niggers.' Professing his preference to shoot 'each and every one of them before they set foot on American soil', Cutting acknowledges that he does not have the guns. It is as if Scorsese is forced to acknowledge that, in some instances, mere firepower cannot do the job.

And so black and white, Irish and 'Native', come together, their lives in the Five Points ones that find themselves invariably cheek-by-jowl. More could have been done with this in *The Gangs of New York*, of course, and the few African-Americans that appear in the film are underdeveloped as characters and as a racial presence.³³ They are almost always at a distance, until they are the object of racist assault and killing, during the Draft Riots, when the threat of blacks rampaging through the workplaces and neighbourhoods of white immigrant New York (not unlike Barnum's elephant, the emblematic African 'beast', loose in the streets of urban civilisation) is seemingly realised with sudden viciousness. Nevertheless, there are hints in Scorsese's film of the symbiosis of black-white relations, and of the ways in which this reciprocity conditioned the nature of racism.

This is conveyed visually in a striking brothel scene, where a black prostitute is draped over Amsterdam's slumbering shoulder as Jenny dresses the Butcher's wounds across the table. White and black, Irish Catholic and nativist, are, in this view, literally touching. As an Irish fiddler plays, an African-American entertains the crowd with the energetic tap dance that was one of the Five Points' cultural inventions. Bill's analytical oratory takes us somewhere interpretively important: 'Look at that. What is that? Rhythms of the Dark Continent tapped down and thrown into an Irish stew, and out comes an American mess. A jig doing a jig.'³⁴ This passage of racist commentary

³³ This could also be said about the representation of the Chinese in Lower Manhattan in the 1860s which, as indicated earlier, is historically inaccurate. The question that needs asking about Scorsese's representation of the Chinese, which like a host of other historically problematic 'imaginings' in the film, is whether or not they distort the large 'narrative' of United States history or contribute to an appreciation of 'larger' interpretations related to issues of representation. For instance, did Scorsese succumb to the Orientalist constructedness of Asian peoples, their cultures and ways of life encased in the mysteriousness of 'the Other'? Or, rather, was he placing them, however historically out of time, in the large historicised proximities of white-Asian relations, recognising, nevertheless, that Asian-white relations were different from black-white relations in as much as the common dialogues and overlapping histories (in terms of work and sociability) that animated African-American, white ethnic, and native-born working people in the mid-to-late nineteenth century were much less in play for whites and Asians? There is no doubt that, in presenting Amsterdam as the sole humane link among whites, blacks, and Asians, Scorsese's film relies on Hollywoodesque conceptions of 'the heroic' protagonist stepping outside of history, and for this he can be criticised. But, whether he has lapsed into the racist imagery of the inscrutable Chinese or attempted to locate Chinese-white relations in plebeian Manhattan as rather more complicated by social distance than other race relations is, to my mind, somewhat open to question. On Orientalism and the social construction of Asian otherness see Said 1979, which, of course, deals with the Muslim Orient, but which is applicable to the conception and social construction of other Asian societies, including China.

³⁴ The script in Scorsese 2002, p. 210, is not the same as the actual language of the film. I have relied here on notes taken.

is perhaps as insightful as many recent writings on whiteness and United States racism precisely because it conveys the proximities within which working-class racism was made. Unlike other nineteenth-century racisms, born of empire's conquests of civilisations of colour, working-class racism in the United States was forged, not at a distance, but in the hearts and minds of closeness, one part of which was competition, another being co-mingling, co-existence, and cultural blending. Out of this would come the vehement denial of dependencies that were often articulated in intensities that explain both the violence and deeply sexualised nature of American racism. And this is precisely why the fomented racism of the immediate Draft Riots context was one part economic (the threat of job loss) and one part sexual, in which grotesque caricatures of 'Miscegenation Balls' ran in the Copperhead press, depicting Lincoln and other prominent Republicans dancing with caricatured African-American women. Along with jobs, blacks were widely presented as on the move to steal white men's wives and sisters. Bill's brief comment on the 'race mixing' of 1860s plebeian culture thus takes us into twentieth-century class and race relations where northern black-white sex districts, the evolution of blues and jazz, the hideous history of the lynch mob, and the sexualisation of racist legal attacks like that fomented on the Scottsboro Boys come together.³⁵

Masculinising class and the gendered obliteration of women

The one area where there is little to defend in *The Gangs of New York* relates to women. It is simply not possible to say much positive about Scorsese's film in this regard. In focusing, in typical Hollywood style, on the flamboyant attractiveness of Jenny, who marches through the film as first, a tough-minded, relentlessly cynical and staunchly independent pickpocket, a former object of Bill's honourable, but inevitably compromised, attractions, and then, second, as Amsterdam's unconditional lover who, third, returns to her stubborn sensibilities of a personal agenda, Scorsese constructs women as the adornment of men. They are merely an appendage to the gangs, either used up and discarded (Hellcat Maggie) or forced, ultimately, to break ranks in futile escape. Jenny, to be sure, does have one of the more powerfully representative gestures of historiographical critique in the film. She traces her route to California with a hand on a map, her finger outlining the journey to the freedoms of the west, not through the continent, but around land masses, the ocean-going route moving south along the eastern seaboard, continuing down the coast of South America and around Cape Horn, and then back up the continents to San Francisco. This pilgrimage will of course be thwarted, and Jenny's dreams end, as many did, badly. But could there be a more

³⁵ See, for only a suggestion of the scope of all of this, Mumford 1997; Palmer 2000; Carter 1969.

decisive repudiation of Frederick Jackson Turner's long-influential 'frontier thesis', in which the lure of land and the west was said to be a safety valve that siphoned off class discontents and explained the quiescence of United States labour?³⁶

It can not be said, of course, that Scorsese is blind to gender. This, and many of his other films, present a gendered reading of their subject, for masculinity is central to all of Scorsese's plot lines, and is most emphatically a dominant structure in *The Gangs of New York*. Indeed, it is too dominant because in its overzealous depiction of the gangs it manages to one-sidedly write out of the history too much, including the presence of women, and, with the ironic origin of the film in Amsterdam's childhood memory of his father's murder at the Butcher's hand, children. It is almost as if Scorsese has followed a radical-feminist plot line, in which the violent power of patriarchy is unleashed in all-encompassing ways that obliterate the agency, indeed often the very presence, of women and the young.

To be sure, the Five Points was no safe haven for infants, adolescents, and females. While *The Gangs of New York* is notably negligent in developing women as characters and as a force in the Five Points adequately, it perhaps makes the necessarily brutal point with stark suggestiveness: family life and the possibilities for women and children in the Bloody Ould Sixth of the 1850s and 1860s was culturally claustrophobic and socially catastrophic. As Carol Groneman Pernicone's unpublished dissertation reveals, the death rate of children in the notorious ward was a predator stalking family life relentlessly: one out of every three children in the Five Points died before the age of five, which registers in the film with the brief allusion to Jenny's stillborn child. With Irish male labourers equally likely to succumb to the dangers of work in the manual and construction trades, women were left the small pickings of the sweated trades or the travails of the street, such as hot corn selling:

Hot Corn! Hot Corn!
 Here's your lily white hot corn.
 All you that's got money –
 Poor me that's got none –
 Come buy my lily hot corn.

But such penny capitalism of the alleyways and squalid squares could easily shade over into the bartering of sexual treating that was a benign version of the occupation, if not of choice then of necessity, of many Five Points' females: prostitution.³⁷

³⁶ On the Turner thesis see Billington (ed.) 1966.

³⁷ On women's New York sweated work, prostitution, and other aspects of female experience in the first half of the nineteenth century see Stansell 1986; Groneman Pernicone 1973. The Hot Corn stanza is from Asbury 1928, p. 8.

The hands that built America

If Scorsese misses obvious opportunities to represent women and blacks more fully, he is also immune to the daily labours that sustained life in all of mid-nineteenth-century America, even in the Five Points. There is almost no engagement with the trades and occupations that dotted the landscape of the life of the Sixth Ward, and that gang formation was materially embedded within. Perhaps the sole exception is the portrayal of the Butcher's technique, but this merely proves the rule of Scorsese's disinterest in actual labour. For the Butcher's butchering has almost nothing to do with meat as a commodity and, indeed, the only 'cuts' that are dispensed are given as a gift to an old 'mother' by the lordly, benevolent Bill. Rather, carcasses are flesh useful for demonstrating the particular knife thrusts that will result in wounds or kills. The dilapidated businesses of the Five Points, in which cigars, chairs, and combs were made, the dirty tasks of slaughtering animals, tanning hides, and brewing drink undertaken, or the back-breaking labours of those casually employed on the docks or as teamsters, hod carriers, and the like sweated out, are not even a shadowy presence in the film. Money is made through theft and the quick score of raking in bets on prize fights. The streets and alleys are scenes for standing, scoring, and squaring off in combat. 'Work', conceived as wage-labour, is non-existent.

This is, to be sure, a further shortcoming, but, given that the film is concerned not so much with the extraction of surplus-value and the production of goods and services, as it is with the ensemble of relations at the core of class politics and its relation to state formation, this strikes me as a shortcoming that can be lived with. *The Gangs of New York* is about the *exchange* relations of class politics in a nascent capitalist order rather than the productive relations of a capitalist economy. Scorsese is nevertheless unambiguous and adamant that his film *is* about the hands that built America, in as much as the machinery of politics, republican order, and democratic 'governance' are reflections of capitalist enterprise and its class relations and creations of that layered materiality. Indeed, the symbolism of hands is everywhere throughout the film, from its opening to its close, and the parade of panoramic, historical shots of the built New York skylines are flashed at the viewer with U-2's 'The Hands That Built America' rounding off the film's musical score. If, unlike Brecht, Scorsese is unconcerned with the actual erection of towers, the hauling of stone, and the forging of materials, *The Gangs of New York* never loses sight of the varied hands that held knives and brickbats, that passed the stained blade from generation to generation, that bloodied rivals, that stuffed ballot boxes, that lynched blacks *and* clasped possibilities of class and racial solidarity, such hands being the often invisible counterpart to the sinewy arms and calloused fingers of waged labour. In the contradictory wrestling that is the essence of modern history, these were indeed the plurality of hands that built, unevenly and often brutally and tragically, a United States of America in which class power was seldom far from the surface of relations that so many have bathed in obfuscation.

Scorsese, whatever his flaws, is to be applauded for presenting us with a different, and more insightful, visualisation.

It perhaps cultivates awarenesses that might take us beyond the spaces Scorsese himself inhabits, to new ground, like that envisioned by Walt Whitman, who penned lines of verse at roughly the same time that the Dead Rabbits and the Bowery Boys clashed in 1857. That 'dreadful fight' left much blood on many blades, with 12 dead and 37 injured. Whitman had the capacity to see differently:

I see those who in any land have died for the good cause,
The seed is spare, nevertheless the crop shall never run out,
(Mind you O foreign kings, O priests, the crop shall never run out.)

I see the blood wash'd entirely away from the axe,
Both blade and helve are clean,
They spirit no more the blood of European nobles, they clasp no more the
necks of queens.

I see the headsman withdrawn and become useless,
I see the scaffold untrodden and mouldy, I see no longer any axe upon it,
I see the mighty and friendly emblem of the power of my own
race, the newest, largest race.

'Song of the Broad Axe', 175–83.v

Walt Whitman, *Chants Democratic*, II

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